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SIPDIS

PARIS FOR WILLIAMS
TREASURY FOR OASIA - T. WRAY
KINSHASA ALSO FOR BRAZZAVILLE OFFICE

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SUBJECT: OMAR BONGO AND THE GABONESE POLITICAL SCENE

REFS: (A) STATE 56003 (NOTAL)
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11. (U) CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR REASONS 1.5 (B, D).

12. (C) SUMMARY: AFTER NEARLY 34 YEARS IN OFFICE, GABONESE PRESIDENT OMAR BONGO IS A WILY POLITICIAN WHO STILL HAS A FIRM GRIP ON POWER. HE IS UNQUESTIONABLY "THE BOSS" AND MAINTAINS AN EXTENSIVE CIRCLE OF FAITHFUL AND PANDERING ALLIES. MANY REMAIN LOYAL LARGELY BECAUSE THEIR LOYALTY IS RICHLY REWARDED WITH FINANCIAL AND JOB SECURITY. PRESIDENT BONGO'S CURRENT TERM ENDS IN 2005, AND SPECULATION SURFACES FREQUENTLY AS TO WHETHER HE IS GROOMING SOMEONE TO SUCCEED HIM. ALTHOUGH HE CLEARLY WATCHES THOSE CLOSEST TO HIM TO EVALUATE THEIR POTENTIAL, BONGO DOES NOT APPEAR AS YET TO HAVE CHOSEN ANYONE IN PARTICULAR, AND IS LIKELY BIDDING HIS TIME TO SEE WHO EMERGES AS A CAPABLE CANDIDATE WORTHY OF HIS SUPPORT. INEVITABLY, BONGO'S OWN FATE WILL BE TIED TO GABON'S FALLING OIL REVENUES, VITAL TO HIS ABILITY TO KEEP PEACE IN A COUNTRY WITH STAGGERING DISPARITIES IN WEALTH AND SIMMERING ETHNIC PRESSURES. THE DECEMBER LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS WILL BE AN INDICATOR OF BONGO'S (AND HIS RULING PARTY'S) FUTURE, BUT MORE, OF HIS INCLINATION TO ALLOW GABON'S SLOW DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS TO CONTINUE. END SUMMARY.

BONGO: HE JUST KEEPS GOING AND GOING...

13. (C) PRESIDENT EL HADJ OMAR BONGO IS FIRMLY IN CONTROL IN GABON. WHILE HE IS DEPENDENT ON THE ADVICE AND SUPPORT HE RECEIVES FROM HIS INNER CIRCLE, THERE IS NO QUESTION OF WHO CALLS THE SHOTS. THOSE CLOSE TO HIM REFER TO HIM UNSELFCONSCIOUSLY AS "LE PATRON" ("THE BOSS") AND REGARD HIM WITH A COMBINATION OF AFFECTION AND RESPECT FOR HIS POLITICAL WILES, HIS MASTERY OF DETAIL AND HIS PRODIGIOUS MEMORY. AFTER NEARLY 34 YEARS IN POWER, AND WITH THE HELP OF GENEROUS OIL REVENUES, BONGO HAS ESTABLISHED A MASTERY OF THE LEVERS OF INFLUENCE THAT NONE CAN CHALLENGE. GABON'S MINERAL WEALTH HAS MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR HIM TO REWARD THOSE CLOSE TO HIM, ENSURING A STRONG SENSE OF LOYALTY, AND TO PURCHASE THE COOPERATION OF THOSE IN OPPOSITION. INDEED, HE IS KNOWN AS A "SOFT TOUCH" FOR HIS WILLINGNESS TO FINANCE ALMOST ANYONE WITH A PERSUASIVE PROPOSAL. AN EMBASSY CONTACT WHO KNOWS BONGO WELL SAYS THAT HE IS PERENNIALY SURPRISED AT THE NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE GRANTED SMALL FORTUNES BECAUSE OF THEIR ABILITY TO CONVINCE THE PRESIDENT THAT THEIR SERVICES ARE

INDISPENSABLE TO HIS SURVIVAL IN OFFICE. WHETHER THIS IS A REFLECTION OF BONGO'S NAIVETE OR HIS OWN WAY OF ACQUIRING

14. (C) BONGO IS ALSO A CUNNING LEADER WHO ENJOYS THOROUGHLY THE GAME OF POLITICS. HE IS WELL INFORMED AND BENEFITS FROM NETWORKS HE HAS PUT IN PLACE BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE GABON, INCLUDING AN ARRAY OF FEMALE "FRIENDS" WITH WHOM HE MAINTAINS CLOSE RELATIONS. BONGO PLACES GREAT STOCK IN KNOWING PERSONALLY THE PLAYERS IN ANY ISSUE OF IMPORTANCE. AT THE SAME TIME, HE IS CAREFUL NOT TO INITIATE ANY UNDERTAKING -- PARTICULARLY OUTSIDE GABON -- WITHOUT A GOOD DEGREE OF CERTAINTY ABOUT THE OUTCOME. FOR EXAMPLE, ALTHOUGH HE CRAVES THE POSITIVE REFLECTION THAT COMES FROM HIS SUCCESSFUL MEDIATION OF REGIONAL CONFLICTS, BONGO ENGAGES IN SUCH EFFORTS ONLY AFTER CAREFUL CONSIDERATION. IN MEDIATING THE CIVIL WAR IN CONGO/B, FOR EXAMPLE, HE MOVED CAUTIOUSLY, MAKING CERTAIN THAT EACH INITIATIVE WAS ACCOMPANIED BY A THOROUGH ROUND OF MEETINGS OF THE KEY PARTIES. HIS HESITATION TO BECOME INVOLVED IN THE CONGO/K DELIBERATIONS SHOWS SIMILAR CAUTION: UNTIL ALL OF THE PARTIES ASK HIM TO BE INVOLVED, AND HE CAN BE RELATIVELY CONFIDENT OF SOME POSITIVE OUTCOME, BONGO IS LIKELY TO LIMIT HIS INVOLVEMENT. WHEN HE DOES CHOOSE TO ACT, HIS YEARS IN OFFICE, AND THE NOT INCONSIDERABLE INFLUENCE AS ELDER STATESMAN THAT HE ENJOYS AMONG AFRICANS, ALLOW BONGO A WIDE MARGIN OF MANEUVER. THE MANTLE OF AUTHORITY -- BUTTRESSED BY A PERSONABLE AND EVEN CHARMING EXTERIOR -- PROVIDES HIM WITH THE ABILITY TO SPEAK FRANKLY TO PEOPLE, SOMETIMES TELLING THEM TRUTHS THAT OTHERS MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO SAY.

BONGO'S INNER CIRCLE

15. (C) BONGO RELIES ON A RELATIVELY SMALL CIRCLE FOR ADVICE. NONETHELESS, AS DEMONSTRATED BY THE JANUARY OUSTING OF EQUIPMENT MINISTER ZACHARIE MYBOTO (REF B), THE LONGEST SERVING MEMBER OF THE PRESIDENT'S CABINET, NO ONE IN BONGO'S INNER CIRCLE IS UNTOUCHABLE. MINISTER OF INTERIOR ANTOINE MBOUMBOU MIYAKOU IS ONE OF THE PRESIDENT'S MOST LOYAL FOLLOWERS AND TRUSTED ADVISORS. BACKED BY THE POLICE AND CONSIDERED BY SOME TO BE UNSCRUPULOUS IN HIS ZEAL, MIYAKOU'S LOYALTY KNOWS NO LIMITS. HE PROVIDES BONGO WITH POLITICAL ADVICE AND UNFAILING SUPPORT. MIYAKOU IS ALSO WELL-PLACED TO ASSIST "LE PATRON" BECAUSE OF HIS RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CONDUCT OF ELECTIONS.

16. (C) PRIME MINISTER JEAN-FRANCOIS NTOUTOUME-EMANE IS ALSO A CLOSE ADVISOR, TO SOME DEGREE BY DEFAULT GIVEN HIS POSITION. BONGO AND THE PRIME MINISTER HAVE AT TIMES HAD HEATED PUBLIC DISAGREEMENTS, AND BONGO MAY NOT TRUST (OR EVEN LIKE) HIM. THE PRESIDENT NONETHELESS RESPECTS NTOUTOUME-EMANE'S INTELLECT, CONSIDERED BY MANY TO BE THE STRONGEST IN THE GOVERNMENT (ONE POPULAR NICKNAME FOR THE PM IS "JACKY THOUSAND-ENCYCLOPEDIAS"). FOREIGN MINISTER JEAN PING (WHO IN THE PAST ALSO HAD A RELATIONSHIP, RESULTING IN A CHILD, WITH PRESIDENTIAL DAUGHTER AND ADVISER PASCALINE BONGO) IS UNDOUBTEDLY THE GABONESE EXPERT ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AND ADVISES BONGO ACCORDINGLY. HE HAS LITTLE INFLUENCE ON DOMESTIC AFFAIRS, HOWEVER, AND DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE PERSONALLY CLOSE TO THE PRESIDENT. REFORM-MINDED FINANCE MINISTER EMILE DOUMBA IS BONGO'S PRIMARY RESOURCE FOR ECONOMIC ADVICE, BUT IS SIMILARLY OUTSIDE THE CIRCLE OF "PRESIDENTIAL INTIMATES."

17. (C) OTHER INDIVIDUALS UPON WHOM THE PRESIDENT RELIES INCLUDE AGING SENATE PRESIDENT GEORGES RAWIRI, WHO IS SEEN BY MANY AS THE MAN MOST LIKELY TO REPLACE BONGO IN THE SHORT TERM IF THE PRESIDENT WERE SUDDENLY TO EXIT THE SCENE. EDUCATION MINISTER AND GOVERNMENT SPOKESMAN ANDRE MBA OBAME AND PRESIDENTIAL SON AND DEFENSE MINISTER ALI-BEN BONGO ALSO PLAY BOTH POLITICAL AND POLICY ADVISING ROLES, AND FREQUENTLY WORK TOGETHER TO ACHIEVE COMMON GOALS (SEE REF B). MINISTER OF MINES, ENERGY, AND PETROLEUM PAUL TOUNGUI IS AN ADVISOR OF APPARENTLY GROWING INFLUENCE. HE IS INTELLIGENT, TECHNICALLY COMPETENT, AND HEADS THE MOST

POWERFUL MINISTRY IN THE GOVERNMENT. OTHER BONGO CONFIDANTS INCLUDE FORMER CAMPAIGN ASSISTANT NGOYOU MOUSSAVOU, VICE PRESIDENT DIDJOB DIVUNGI DI NDINGE, AND ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL CHAIRMAN LOUIS GASTON MAYILA.

RELATIONSHIPS

18. (C) RELATIONSHIPS ARE EVERYTHING IN THIS SMALL COUNTRY, WHERE VIRTUALLY ALL OF THE PROMINENT FAMILIES ARE RELATED IN SOME WAY TO PRESIDENT BONGO AND TO EACH OTHER. AT TIMES GABON CAN SEEM LIKE AN AFRICAN PEYTON PLACE. IN ADDITION TO PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS, ETHNICITY PLAYS A VITAL ROLE IN ALLIANCES. BONGO HAS BEEN VERY CAREFUL TO APPEASE DIFFERENT ETHNIC GROUPS BY PARCELING OUT CHOICE POSITIONS AMONG THEM. SOME CONSIDER THE SECRET TO BONGO'S LONGEVITY TO BE HIS ABILITY TO BALANCE THE DESIRES OF THE LARGER GABONESE ETHNIC GROUPS. AS A MEMBER OF ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S SMALLER GROUPS (BATEKE), HE HAS SUCCESSFULLY POSITIONED HIMSELF ABOVE THE ETHNIC FRAY WHILE KEEPING THE LARGER GROUPS (E.G., THE FANG AND BAPOUNOU) QUIESCENT. ONE RESULT OF BONGO'S CONSTANT EFFORTS TO APPEASE DIFFERENT ETHNIC GROUPS HAS BEEN TO CREATE MINISTRIES HEADED AND STAFFED BY ONE ETHNIC GROUP OR ANOTHER. THOUGH POLITICALLY EFFECTIVE, THE PRACTICE HAS NOT LED TO COOPERATIVE OR EFFICIENT INTERMINISTERIAL OPERATIONS. AT THE CABINET LEVEL, ETHNIC CONSIDERATIONS CREATE SHIFTING ALLIANCES AMONG BONGO ADVISORS. CURRENTLY, FOR EXAMPLE, ALI-BEN BONGO IS CLOSE TO GENERAL NGUETSARA, THE CANTANKEROUS HEAD OF THE GENERAL OFFICE FOR DOCUMENTATION AND IMMIGRATION. AT THE SAME TIME, ALI-BEN AND EDUCATION MINISTER MBA OBAME ARE PERCEIVED AS GOOD (PERHAPS "VERY GOOD," ACCORDING TO SALACIOUS RUMORS) FRIENDS, AND ALI-BEN MAINTAINS CLOSE TIES TO TRANSPORTATION MINISTER IDRIS NGARI.

SUCCESSION

19. (C) OMAR BONGO HAS GIVEN NO INDICATION YET THAT HE IS GROOMING SOMEONE PARTICULAR TO SUCCEED HIM IN 2005. INDEED, WHETHER BONGO, WHO IS 67, WILL SEEK RE-ELECTION IN 2005 REMAINS AMBIGUOUS, THOUGH MANY ASSUME HE WILL NOT. BONGO IS EXTREMELY CAUTIOUS WHEN IT COMES TO PROTECTING HIS OWN IMAGE; HE WOULD NOT WANT TO BE CAUGHT BACKING ANYONE BUT THE EVENTUAL WINNER. BONGO WILL NOT THROW HIS SUPPORT BEHIND ANYONE WHO HAS A CHANCE OF LOSING, THEREBY TARNISHING THE PRESIDENT'S LEGACY. AT THE SAME TIME, HE APPEARS TO HAVE NO INTEREST YET IN ENDOWING ANY OF HIS FOLLOWERS WITH "HEIR APPARENT" CREDENTIALS. MOST BELIEVE BONGO IS BIDDING HIS TIME, WATCHING FOR A CANDIDATE TO PROVE HIMSELF, BUILD A (NON-THREATENING) CONSTITUENCY, DEMONSTRATE HIS CAPABILITIES, AND THEREBY EARN THE PRESIDENT'S SUPPORT. BONGO IS BOTH VERY CAUTIOUS AND A REALIST. ONE OF THE CHARACTERISTICS HE WILL BE LOOKING FOR IN A SUCCESSOR WILL BE THAT INDIVIDUAL'S ABILITY TO PROMOTE STABILITY IN THE MIRE OF TURMOIL THAT IS CENTRAL AFRICA. BONGO TAKES HIS ROLE AS THE REGION'S "DOYEN " -- A MEDIATOR AND PEACEMAKER -- SERIOUSLY. HE WILL SUPPORT SOMEONE WORTHY OF CARRYING ON THAT ROLE.

110. (C) DEFENSE MINISTER ALI-BEN BONGO IS ONE PERSON PRESIDENT BONGO MAY BE WATCHING AS A POSSIBLE SUCCESSOR. IF THIS IS THE CASE, BEING THE PRESIDENT'S SON WILL NOT NECESSARILY GIVE HIM AN ADVANTAGE OVER OTHERS. HE WILL NEED TO PROVE HIMSELF LIKE THE REST. A FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER, THE YOUNGER BONGO HAS INCREASED HIS VISIBILITY IN RECENT MONTHS. IN FEBRUARY HE ORGANIZED A "NATIONAL MILITARY DAY," CELEBRATED BY PARADES TO SHOW OFF NEW UNIFORMS HE PURCHASED FOR THE ARMED FORCES. DURING A FEBRUARY TRIP TO GERMANY HE ARRANGED FOR THE GABONESE MILITARY TO PURCHASE 600 MERCEDES TRUCKS OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL YEARS. THE YOUNGER BONGO IS EAGER TO INCREASE THE MILITARY'S CAPABILITIES AND PROFESSIONALISM, ENTHUSIASTICALLY SUPPORTING PARTICIPATION IN U.S. IMET TRAINING PROGRAMS AND HOSTING A VARIETY OF MILITARY EXERCISES AND CONFERENCES. ALI-BEN BONGO, WHO CONVERTED TO

ISLAM WITH HIS FATHER IN THE 1970S, ALSO STYLES HIMSELF A LEADER OF GABON'S MUSLIMS AND, IN THAT ROLE, IS A USEFUL EAR FOR THE ELDER BONGO IN THAT SMALL (ABOUT 5 PERCENT OF THE GABONESE) BUT INFLUENTIAL COMMUNITY.

¶11. (C) MINES, ENERGY, AND PETROLEUM MINISTER PAUL TOUNGUI ALSO GIVES SIGNS OF RECEIVING GROWING SUPPORT FROM PRESIDENT BONGO. RECENTLY PROMOTED TO THE RANK OF MINISTER OF STATE (REF B), TOUNGUI IS A LONGTIME ADVISOR TO THE PRESIDENT WITH A REPUTATION AS A CLEVER ADMINISTRATOR AND POLITICAL MANEUVERER. MANY TOOK TOUNGUI'S RECENT PROMOTION AS A SIGN THAT PRESIDENT BONGO IS DRAWING HIM CLOSER TO THE CENTER OF POWER. TOUNGUI'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PRESIDENT IS FURTHER REINFORCED BY HIS LONG-TERM AMOROUS RELATIONSHIP (OR "MARRIAGE", AS IT IS DESCRIBED HERE) WITH BONGO'S DAUGHTER AND NOMINAL CHIEF OF STAFF, PASCALINE.

ECONOMICS AND CORRUPTION

¶12. (C) THE MOST SERIOUS THREAT TO GABON'S LONG-TERM STABILITY (AND TO BONGO'S REGIME) IS THE EXPECTED DECREASE IN OIL REVENUES. BONGO'S ABILITY TO USE THIS CONSIDERABLE WEALTH TO REWARD AND ENRICH POWERFUL INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS WITHIN THE COUNTRY HAS BEEN THE KEY TO HIS MAINTAINING STABILITY AND PRESERVING POWER FOR THE PAST THREE DECADES. AFTER REACHING A HIGH OF 18.5 MILLION TONS IN 1998, OIL PRODUCTION DECREASED TO 13.5 MILLION TONS IN 2000 AND MAY FALL TO AS LITTLE AS 6.5 MILLION TONS IN 2005. WHILE DEEP-WATER EXPLORATION CONTINUES OFFSHORE, THERE IS VIRTUALLY NO HOPE THAT GABON WILL BE ABLE TO MAINTAIN ITS CURRENT DEPENDENCE ON OIL REVENUES IN THE MEDIUM AND LONG TERMS.

¶13. (C) BEFORE THE ARRIVAL OF FINANCE MINISTER EMILE DOUMBA IN 1999, THE SYSTEM OF DISPENSING GOVERNMENT REVENUE WAS COMPLETELY ARBITRARY AND UNDISCIPLINED. DESPITE DOUMBA'S PROGRESS IN REIGNING IN OFF-BUDGET EXPENDITURES, PRESIDENT BONGO CONTINUES TO EXERCISE PERSONAL CONTROL OVER A SIGNIFICANT PORTION OF GOVERNMENT REVENUE. BONGO UNDOUBTEDLY SETS THE TONE AND IS AWARE OF THE WORST EXAMPLES OF CORRUPTION WITHIN HIS ADMINISTRATION, BUT RARELY TAKES ANY ACTION TO CONTROL IT. BOWING TO PRESSURE FROM THE IMF, AN ANTI-CORRUPTION BILL WAS RECENTLY AND BELATEDLY INTRODUCED TO THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. THE LEGISLATION IS CURRENTLY UNDERGOING "SOFTENING", HOWEVER, AND SEEMS UNLIKELY TO HAVE AS MUCH EFFECT ON BONGO'S WAY OF OPERATING AS THE LOSS OF OIL REVENUE. BONGO ALSO ENGINEERED PASSAGE OF A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT IN LATE 2000 THAT PROVIDES THE PRESIDENT ABSOLUTE IMMUNITY FOR ACTIONS TAKEN WHILE IN OFFICE. MANY READ THE MOVE AT THE TIME AS A SIGN OF BONGO LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR AN EVENTUAL "GRACEFUL" DEPARTURE FROM POWER.

¶14. (C) GABON DOES NOT HAVE A GREAT DEAL TO SHOW FOR OVER TWO DECADES OF WINDFALL OIL REVENUES, ASIDE FROM THE PRIVATE WEALTH ACCUMULATED BY A RELATIVELY FEW INDIVIDUALS CLOSE TO THE PRESIDENT. THE LARGE MAJORITY OF THE COUNTRY'S WEALTH IS ESTIMATED TO BE HELD BY LESS THAN 50,000 OF ITS 1.2 MILLION CITIZENS, ALTHOUGH THE GOVERNMENT IS CAREFUL NOT TO COLLECT OR PUBLISH STATISTICS THAT WOULD ALLOW A RELIABLE ASSESSMENT. DESPITE THE LACK OF DATA, WORLD BANK ANALYSTS PRIVATELY ESTIMATE THAT GABON MAY HAVE ONE OF THE HIGHEST INCOME DISPARITIES OF ANY COUNTRY IN THE WORLD. ONE THING THAT IS CLEAR IS THAT ONCE THERE IS NO LONGER A STEADY FLOW OF CASH TO CALM THOSE WHO MIGHT PROTEST SUCH INEQUALITY, BONGO (OR WHOEVER REPLACES HIM) WILL BE LEFT TO RELY ON HIS CONSIDERABLE OTHER SKILLS OF PERSUASION TO PREVENT DISSATISFACTION FROM GETTING OUT OF CONTROL.

UPCOMING LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

¶15. (C) THE UPCOMING DECEMBER LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS, AND THE SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF THE OPPOSITION, WILL PROVIDE SOME MEASURE OF THE GABONESE PEOPLE'S SATISFACTION WITH THE

STATUS QUO. THE ELECTIONS WILL UNDOUBTEDLY TEST PRESIDENT BONGO'S SKILLS OF PERSUASION AND DEMONSTRATE THE EXTENT OF HIS POLITICAL INFLUENCE. THE ELECTIONS WILL BE THE FIRST TO OCCUR SINCE BONGO WAS RETURNED FOR A FIFTH TERM IN 1998. THOSE ELECTIONS, THOUGH UNQUESTIONABLY MORE OPEN THAN THEIR PREDECESSORS, WERE MARRED BY IRREGULARITIES THAT GENERALLY FAVORED THE INCUMBENT, INCLUDING INCOMPLETE AND INACCURATE ELECTORAL LISTS AND THE USE OF FALSE DOCUMENTS TO CAST VOTES. DESPITE THE FLAWS, MOST INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS CONCLUDED AT THE TIME THAT THE RESULT GENERALLY REFLECTED THE POPULAR WILL. THE OPPOSITION BELIEVES THE RULING PARTY (PARTI DEMOCRATIQUE GABONAIS -- PDG) FIXED THE 1998 ELECTIONS, AND MANY GABONESE ANTICIPATE SIMILAR BEHAVIOR THIS YEAR. THE ACCUSATION TENDS, HOWEVER, TO GLOSS OVER THE FACT THAT THE OPPOSITION RAN A FRAGMENTED AND FECKLESS CAMPAIGN. BONGO HIMSELF IS CLEARLY CONCERNED ABOUT THE UPCOMING ELECTIONS, BUT IT IS TOO EARLY TO TELL WHETHER HIS PARTY FACES ANY REAL DANGER OF LOSING ITS MAJORITY IN PARLIAMENT. THE CAMPAIGN WILL ALSO BE AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE OPPOSITION TO DEMONSTRATE WHETHER IT LEARNED FROM ITS 1998 MISTAKES.

OPPOSITION LEADERS IN GABON

¶16. (C) BONGO'S WIN IN 1998 WEAKENED AND DISHEARTENED THE ALREADY FRAGMENTED GABONESE OPPOSITION. AFTER 34 YEARS OF THE SAME PARTY IN POWER, THE POPULATION HAS GROWN APATHETIC, WITH MANY YOUNGER PEOPLE REFUSING TO GO TO THE TROUBLE TO VOTE. BONGO'S APPROACH IN DEALING WITH THE OPPOSITION HAS MIRRORED HIS MANAGEMENT OF THE GOVERNMENT: PAYOFFS AND CO-OPTATION. FEW OPPOSITION LEADERS HAVE RESISTED HIS TEMPTATIONS, FURTHER REDUCING THEIR INFLUENCE WITH A CYNICAL ELECTORATE. IN THE NEAR TERM, WE EXPECT THE OPPOSITION TO REMAIN RELATIVELY WEAK UNLESS RADICAL EVENTS SHAKE BONGO'S GRIP ON POWER.

¶17. (C) FORMER FINANCE MINISTER AND BONGO ALLY-TURNED-OPPONENT JEAN-PIERRE LEMBOUMBA IS NOT PARTICULARLY VISIBLE IN THE GABONESE POLITICAL SCENE TODAY. KNOWN TO HAVE AMASSED CONSIDERABLE WEALTH AS A RESULT OF CROOKED DEALINGS DURING HIS FINANCE MINISTRY DAYS, LEMBOUMBA NOW LIMITS HIS POLITICAL ACTIVITY TO FINANCING OPPOSITION PARTIES AND NEWSPAPERS. RUMORS CONTEND THAT HE MAY HAVE RECONCILED WITH BONGO AND MADE A DEAL, PROMISING TO TONE DOWN HIS OPPOSITION RHETORIC.

¶18. (C) PIERRE MAMBOUNDOU, PRESIDENT OF THE GABONESE PEOPLE'S UNION (UPG), IS KNOWN AS THE LEADER OF THE "REAL" OPPOSITION. THE SECOND-PLACE FINISHER IN THE 1998 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, MAMBOUNDOU HEADS THE HIGH COUNCIL OF THE RESISTANCE, A GROUP OF TEN OPPOSITION PARTIES THAT MEETS WEEKLY TO STRATEGIZE. A REPUTEDLY HONEST MAN WHO SUPPORTS HIS CLAIMS WITH FACTS, HE MAY BE THE ONLY MAJOR OPPOSITION FIGURE WHO HAS NOT TAKEN MONEY FROM BONGO.

¶19. (C) MANY CONTEND THAT LONG-TIME OPPOSITION LEADER AND LIBREVILLE MAYOR PAUL MBA-ABESSOLE IS NO LONGER A SERIOUS THREAT TO THE PRESIDENT. FATHER MBA-ABESSOLE (HE IS ALSO A CATHOLIC PRIEST), WHO LEADS GABON'S OLDEST AND LARGEST OPPOSITION PARTY, IS WIDELY VIEWED TO HAVE BEEN CO-OPTED BY BONGO. HIS PARTY, LONG CALLED THE NATIONAL RALLY OF LUMBERJACKS, RECENTLY CHANGED ITS NAME TO THE LESS COLORFUL "RALLY FOR GABON". THE NAME CHANGE WAS ACCOMPANIED BY AN AIRING OF THE PARTY'S DIRTY LAUNDRY, WITH THE MORE VOCAL CRITICS OF THE REGIME LEAVING TO CHART THEIR OWN POLITICAL COURSE. DURING THIS STRIFE THE PARTY NEWSPAPER "LE RASSEMBLEUR" (FORMERLY "LE BUCHERON" -- "THE LUMBERJACK"), WHICH FOR YEARS PUBLISHED SCATHING ALLEGATIONS OF PRESIDENTIAL CORRUPTION, HAS CONSIDERABLY TONED DOWN ITS ATTACKS.

CONCLUSION

¶20. (C) OMAR BONGO HAS BECOME ONE OF AFRICA'S (AND THE

WORLD'S) LONGEST-SERVING HEADS OF STATE BY BUILDING A CAREFUL BALANCE OF COMPETING ETHNIC INTERESTS AND OILING IT GENEROUSLY WITH PETROLEUM REVENUES. AS THE OIL MONEY DRIES UP, BONGO -- OR HIS SUCCESSOR -- WILL FIND THE MACHINE INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT TO KEEP RUNNING. FOR NOW, HOWEVER, SATISFACTION WITH THE STATUS QUO ON THE PART OF THOSE WHO BENEFIT FROM IT, AND FEAR OF THE STRIFE THAT MIGHT REPLACE IT ON THE PART OF THOSE WHO DON'T, KEEP BONGO FIRMLY IN CONTROL. FOR THAT REASON THE DECEMBER LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS WILL LIKELY SAY MORE ABOUT THE REGIME'S WILLINGNESS TO CONTINUE TO RELAX ITS CONTROLS ON GABON'S VERSION OF DEMOCRACY THAN THEY WILL ABOUT HOW GABON WILL BE GOVERNED IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS.

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